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## Reinterpreting the Comedy of Errors: Exploring "Madness" and the Need to Belong

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**REINTERPRETING *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*:  
EXPLORING “MADNESS” AND THE NEED TO BELONG**

by

**William K. Smith**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

**of**

**DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

**in**

**English  
in the Department of HASS**

**Approved:**

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**Spring 2009**

## Abstract

Since *The Comedy of Errors*' rescue from the literary bargain bin where it was tossed by nineteenth and early twentieth-century critics, many modern scholars have provided insightful cultural, linguistic, and theatrical commentaries on a play that is clearly more complex than it first seems. One area these recent discussions frequently address is the play's portrayal of madness in early modern society. However, what many of these discussions fail to remember is that ultimately *Errors* is a comedy "performed for the Delight of the Beholders" and that no one in the play is actually mad. Therefore, this essay argues that *The Comedy of Errors* actually makes fun of the prevalent theories of madness in early modern England, ultimately undermining them, and implicitly suggesting in their place, a view on the subject of madness which relies upon the fact that the characters in the play, most notably Egeon, the two Antipholi and Adriana, are not mad, but actually suffering what the Early Modern would have called "distraction" or "melancholia," a condition that is strikingly akin to modern identity displacement or dysphoria - conditions that are defined by modern psychology as an aspect of a "fundamental need to belong."

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W. K. Smith

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Since *The Comedy of Errors*' rescue from the literary bargain bin where it was tossed by nineteenth and early twentieth-century critics,<sup>1</sup> many modern scholars have provided insightful cultural, linguistic, and theatrical commentaries on a play that is clearly more complex than it first seems.<sup>2</sup> One area these recent discussions frequently address is the play's portrayal of madness in early modern society. For example, Carol Thomas Neely uses the play to refute the simplistic view of madness in the sixteenth century promulgated by the work of Michel Foucault, and reveals a wide array of causes and cures for "distraction" during the Elizabethan era. Stephen Greenblatt provides a reading of the play that reveals early modern anxiety over madness, as does Robert O'Viking; Aaron Landau uses it to talk about the confounding of human reason. These scholars offer interesting readings of the play's relation to prevalent theories of early modern madness, but they all forget that ultimately *Errors* is a comedy "performed for the Delight of the Beholders"<sup>3</sup> and that no one in the play is actually mad.

In fact, as this essay will argue, *The Comedy of Errors* actually makes fun of the prevalent theories of madness in early modern England, ultimately undermining them, and implicitly suggesting in their place, a strikingly modern view on the subject of madness during the later sixteenth century. This contemporary view on the subject of mental anxiety relies upon the fact that the characters in the play, most notably Egeon, the two Antipholi and Adriana, are not mad but actually suffering what the Early Modern would have called "distraction"<sup>4</sup> or "melancholia," a condition that is strikingly akin to modern identity displacement or dysphoria. These disorders are defined by modern psychology as an aspect of a "fundamental need to belong"; they stress the role of a person's "collective self-esteem" in sustaining good psychological health.<sup>5</sup> Before presenting this vision of madness, however, the play first entertains, mocks, and finally rejects the two dominant explanations for "distraction" and

“melancholia”: religious instability, which often was viewed as a path to demonic possession, and humoral imbalance.

The oldest, and possibly most powerful, scientific explanation for individual madness in the early modern period was the belief that “distraction” was rooted in religious and/or supernatural influences, and therefore curable by religious rites which often included the practice of exorcism. Essentially, it was believed that as a person “sinned,” or committed religious error, they moved farther away from the protection of the “one true religion” and “God,” their actions thereby exposing themselves to the assailments of the devil. As a person then moved farther away from the divine protection of the church they became more vulnerable to the possibility of possession by either the devil himself or more likely, one of his demonic minions. Once possessed the person was then viewed to be “lost” until restored to health through religious rites, which frequently included repentance and exorcism. This view is most widely known through the work of Michel Foucault, who argues that “From the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century” patients would seek to be cured of madness by “soliciting...strange incantations...grimaces of terror” and “renewed rites of purification...”.<sup>6</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl similarly remark that madness springs from religious/supernatural roots by noting that, during the middle ages and the Renaissance, melancholy was associated with *acedia*, the loss of faith resulting in despair.<sup>7</sup> This view is further supported by Kent Cartwright, G.R. Elliot, Aaron Landau, Greenblatt and Neely—all of whom recognize religious and supernatural forces as accepted causes of distraction to the early modern populace.<sup>8</sup>

The theory that religious/superstitious stimuli can lead to distraction also appears in the literary works of the time. In Book One of Edmund Spenser’s *The First Booke of the Faerie*

*Qveene* published around the same time as *Errors*,<sup>9</sup> the tale of the Redcrosse knight illustrates how distraction can set in due to religious error, which could also be represented as religious “wandering.” In Book One<sup>10</sup>, the Redcrosse knight, who represents both the individual member of the larger Christian community and St. George in particular, is on a quest to expel evil from himself, and defend the church from the advances of Satan or the “Dragon horrible and stearne.” At the very beginning of the narrative, Redcrosse knight is forced off his path towards sanctification by “an hideous storme of raine” and becomes lost in the nearby “wandring wood” causing him to:

...wander too and fro in wayes vnknowne,

Furthest from end then, when they nearest weene,

That makes them doubt, their wits be not their owne

His wandering eventually leads him to the cave of a monster called Error. The knight, pointedly ignoring the warnings of his companion Una, or “truth,” plunges into the monster’s lair. Having so brazenly disregarded the counsel of his companion Una, who represents “the one true religion,” the knight has metaphorically committed sin and quickly finds himself “wrapt in Error’s endless train.” The lesson here is explicit: if one wanders from the path of righteousness, he or she will quickly lose control of their wits (“their wits be not their owne”) becoming possessed by religious error or sin until they are either vanquished by Error or saved by intervening “true religion.”

This same sort of interplay between wandering and religious/supernatural possession is evident in *The Comedy of Errors* from the very opening of the play. The play opens with the “hopeless and helpless” merchant Egeon, who has wandered through “the farthest Greece” and “the bounds of Asia” in search of his son Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant Dromio of



Syracuse (1.2. 132-133). The wide-ranging wanderings of Egeon over the face of the globe are very reminiscent of the “to and fro” wanderings experienced by the Redcrosse knight. Just like the knight, Egeon’s wanderings have led him to Ephesus –a place of sin, possession and an impending “doom of death” (1.1.2). Ephesus itself encapsulates the problem of religious “wandering” suggesting by Egeon’s travels in search of his sons. Shakespeare specifically changed the setting of the play from Epidamnum, the setting of his chief source for the play *Menaechmi*, to Ephesus, a city known by the Elizabethan audience to be associated with supernatural and religious rites.<sup>11</sup> For Shakespeare’s audience, the city would have been most familiar as a center of pagan worship. In Acts, devotees of Diana drive the apostle Paul from of the city. Before his expulsion, however, Paul performs a number of exorcisms. When these exorcisms are unsuccessfully imitated by “vagabond Jews,” the failed exorcists are attacked by a possessed madman: “the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (19.16). This failure and Paul’s successes lead to conversions and the burning of magic books: “Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men” (19.19). Thus, as Foakes and T.W. Baldwin mention, Ephesus, for the Elizabethan audience, would have been associated with magic -“curious arts” - and madness caused by possession.<sup>12</sup> This popular attitude toward Ephesus is reflected in *The Comedy of Errors* when Antipholus of Syracuse describes the city as full of:

... nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,  
 Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,  
 Soul-killing witches that deform the body,  
 Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,

And many such-like liberties of sin (1.2.99-103).

This description of the city suggests that Shakespeare consciously set his play in a place known for religious deviance and possession. This is a place, which, like the monster Error in *The Faerie Queene*, can easily ensnare the errant wanderer in its “endless train” of sin rendering its victim helplessly “possessed” until saved by exorcism or “the one true religion.”

Further allusions to the danger of magic, possession and sin can be found throughout the play. Dromio of Syracuse remarks to Antipholus of Syracuse during their first encounter with Adriana and Luciana: “I cross me for a sinner. / This is the fairy land; O spite of spites, / We talk with goblins, elves and sprites” (2.2.188-190), alluding to the possibility that black magic is afoot. In the third act, Antipholus of Syracuse remarks, “There’s none but witches do inhabit here” (3.2.155), and in the fourth act there is maelstrom of allusions to witchery, black magic and exorcism: “Lapland sorcerers inhabit here” (4.3.11), “Satan avoid, I charge thee tempt me not / ...is this mistress Satan? / It is the devil” (4.3.46-48), “sorceress” (4.3.64), “the fiend is strong within him” (4.4.105), “...be mad, good / master; cry ‘the devil’.” (4.4.126), and “witches” (4.4.145). It is also during the fourth act that Dr. Pinch performs his exorcism on Antipholus of Ephesus: “I charge thee, Satan, hous’d within this man, / To yield possession to my holy prayers, / And to thy state of darkness hie thee straight; / I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven” (4.4.52-55). These instances directly allude to the dangers of religious wandering, possession and sin in *Comedy of Errors*—conditions that, if not treated through religious intervention, most often in the form of exorcism, were thought to lead to distraction or modern day dysphoria.

Samuel Harsnett’s well-known *Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures* also demonstrates that distraction was often seen to be caused by religious error and possession and treated with exorcism.<sup>13</sup> In fact, an early modern audience would have readily accepted the

possibility that someone could be demonically possessed, as well as Dr. Pinch's prescribed treatment for one so afflicted: "They must be bound and laid in some dark room" (4.4.90-92). As Robert Reed remarks, this "dark-room treatment" was "one of the chief methods for the treatment of the insane in both Elizabethan and seventeenth-century England."<sup>14</sup> However, when Dr. Pinch performs his exorcism on Antipholus of Ephesus, the audience, no doubt, saw him as Antipholus of Ephesus does: "a mountebank / A thread-bare juggler and a fortune-teller" (5.1.239-40). As Neely suggests, Shakespeare is making "a mockery of three early modern male authority figures - a Doctor, a Schoolmaster, and a Catholic exorcist."<sup>15</sup> Yet this mockery is due, not to any qualms with the idea that madness could be induced by religious error or cured by exorcism, but to the fact that the audience knew neither of the Ephesians were actually mad.

As *The Comedy of Errors* suggests, supernatural and religious reasons were often cited as causes—and exorcism as treatment—of madness in early modern England.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, while many people believed that madness was caused by religious error and possession, the period saw the growth of a different intellectual explanation for distraction: that it was caused by humoral imbalance.<sup>17</sup> These scientific theories of madness were particularly promoted by Neo-Platonists like Philipp Melanchthon and Marsilio Ficino, who had recently revisited the humoral theories of Aristotle's *De Anima* and *Problem XXX*;<sup>18</sup> they helped promote an infusion of humoral and scientific explanations for distraction in the early modern period. As Katherine E. Maus remarks, in the common writings of the period "the whole interior of the body—heart, liver, womb, bowels, kidneys, gall, blood, lymph—quite often involves itself in the production of the mental interior,"<sup>19</sup> a claim that attests to the growing popularity of humoral and scientific means to explain the ailments of the human mind. This popular use of humoral and scientific methods is also attested to by three early modern figures: Richard Napier, who was suspicious of any patient

who claimed demonic possession or witchcraft as a cause for madness;<sup>20</sup> Timothy Bright, who advocated “the phisicke cure” for “the strange effects” of madness “in our minds and bodies;”<sup>21</sup> and Robert Burton, who listed a wide variety of possible causes of melancholy, and subsequently distraction, among them lovesickness, mania, solitude and *hypocondriacus*.<sup>22</sup> The idea that distraction has physical causes is also reflected in the literary works of the time, including Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Lear’s madness is depicted as being at least partially “bodily” and “natural.” His descent into madness can be traced though his exposure in old age to the cold and storm, his unintentional banishment of Cordelia, his other daughters’ betrayals, and, climactically, his encounter with Poor Tom. As Neely points out, “as Lear loses his kingdom, his soldiers, his children, his houses, his robes, he gradually loses control” and “is subsequently restored to sanity by conventional remedies, conventionally applied by a doctor--herbal medicine, sleep, clean garments, and music.”<sup>23</sup>

In *Errors*, Shakespeare references these medical or physically based causes just as often as he does the religious and supernatural. When Antipholus of Syracuse is first confronted by Adriana he expresses his confusion by asking “what error drives our eyes and ears amiss?” (2.2.184). This question suggests two different interpretations. The first is that someone has made an “error” in identifying Antipholus. The second relies on an archaic meaning of the word “error” that would have been common in Renaissance England: error defined as “fury” and “extravagance of passion.”<sup>24</sup> This kind of “error” or extreme passion is cited by Michael Schoenfeldt as a cause for severe depression,<sup>25</sup> and is also cited by Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholy* as a cause of disordered sense which if not corrected could lead to distraction and the appearance of “horrible and fearful apparitions.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, Antipholus of Syracuse acknowledges the possibility that the cause of his confusion may not be supernatural in nature,

but instead a result of an imbalance of his internal passions or humors. The idea that madness can be caused by humoral imbalance is further acknowledged in the play when Antipholus of Syracuse, after hearing of his servant Dromio's unpleasant encounter with the kitchen wench, recalls his earlier wooing of Luciana and remarks:

Possess'd with such a gentle sovereign grace,  
 Of such enchanting presence and discourse,  
 Hath almost made me traitor to myself;  
 But lest myself be guilty to self-wrong,  
 I'll stop mine ears against the mermaid's song. (3.2.159-163)

Antipholus of Syracuse recognizes the possibility that his passion for Luciana, brought about by her "gentle sovereign grace" and "enchanting presence and discourse," might drive him to distraction and make "me traitor to myself" and commit the "self-wrong" of suicide if his passion grows too strong. Therefore, he decides to "stop mine ears against the mermaid's song." Indeed, the idea that passion is naturally "distracting," and can in fact cause mental instability, is widely suggested in the literature of the period; the danger of passion is so prevalent that Robert Burton devotes a third of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to impassioned love and informs his readers how such a distraction occurs: the beloved infects the lover through the eyes, for "rays...sent from the eyes, carry certain spiritual vapours with them, and so infect the other party" (681). This infection then lodges itself in "the lower regions of the psyche, from whence it rises to distort the lover's senses," and drive him or her mad (681-82). He then counsels his readers: "Go to Bedlam for examples. It is so well known in every village, how many have either died for love, or voluntarily made away themselves, that I need not much labour to prove it..." (763). Additional allusions to humoral theory can be found in *The Comedy of Errors* when the

Ephesians are diagnosed by Dr. Pinch as being distracted “by their pale and deadly looks” (4.4.91) an assertion that is quickly supported by Luciana: “Ay me, poor man, how pale and wan he looks” (4.4.106). Humoral based treatments for madness are also prescribed in the play. Adriana tells the Abbess that she will “attend my husband, be his nurse” and “diet his sickness...” (5.1.98-99), implying that she will cure his sickness by “care” and “diet.” The Abbess responds by saying she “will not let him stir / Till I have us’d the approved means” of “wholesome syrups” and “drugs” in order “to make of him a formal man again” (5.1.102-105). These are methods that surely would have been suggested by Bright, Napier and Burton.

*The Comedy of Errors*, then, gives two separate explanations for the causes of mental distraction. Its inclusion of references to both the scientific and the supernatural, accurately reflect the fact that the two mingled in contemporary Early Modern England discussion. George Rosen notes that even medical doctors who favored “natural” reasoning would, in extreme cases, cite possession or black magic as causes of distraction.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Napier, Bright and Burton, the very same doctors who as we have seen were advocates of physical and natural causes for insanity, also offered a variety of supernatural remedies for mental illness. Burton, for example, who favors humor theory based explanations in his *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, interrupts his humoral descriptions with a detailed “Digression of the nature of Spirits, bad Angles, or Devils, and how they cause Melancholy” (157-79). Napier, along with prescribing natural remedies such as bloodletting and purges, often gave out astrological amulets, offered prayers and even performed exorcisms. According to Michael MacDonald, Napier most often relied on a combination of the natural and the supernatural in his remedies, counseling patients to: “First let them blood” then give them an amulet which was “good for many infirmities...against all evil spirits, fairies, witcheries, possessed, frantic, lunatic.”<sup>28</sup> Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of*

*Melancholie* actually strives to provide both Galenic remedies and theological ones. His main aim is to distinguish between naturally caused melancholy, “the phisicke cure” for the “strange effects” of melancholy “in our minds and bodies,” and the spiritually induced melancholy: “spiritual consolation for such as have thereto adjoined an afflicted conscience.”<sup>29</sup>

For Elizabethan society, the mixing of the two categories was not contradictory. Basil Clarke and Paul H. Kocher both attest to the idea that the natural and supernatural explanations for madness coexisted throughout the Middle Ages, and that by the early modern period most discussions about madness concerned themselves with distinguishing between the two distinct modes of thought.<sup>30</sup> By representing contradictory ideas about what caused madness that ranged from the humeroal to the demonic, *The Comedy of Errors* accurately reflected the complex state in which the topic of madness was found during this time period. These theories compete in the text of the play in the same way the healers and doctors of the period interwove their prescriptions and treatments, apparently hedging their bets. As a result, the play accurately reflects an atmosphere with which the audience would be familiar—one that saw supernatural explanations for madness co-existing with “natural” or biological explanations for insanity. This deft delineation of these simultaneously existing modes of thought is done, however, not with the intention of simply reflecting contemporary early modern attitudes. Rather, Shakespeare’s purpose in invoking these approaches to madness seems to be primarily to debunk them.

For any attempt to heal the characters of their “madness” can only be perceived by the audience as comical, given that the audience knows full well that none of the characters in the play are mad. This fact is supported by an examination of Dr. Pinch’s attempts to “cure” the Ephesian Antipholus. Jonathan V. Crewe describes Pinch’s attempt as “a bizarre compound of schoolmasterly pedantry, of quasi-religious conjuration ...and of confidently propounded

truisms.”<sup>31</sup> Pinch, with almost no attempt at diagnosis, arbitrarily pronounces that the Syracusian Dromio and Antipholus are mad, and then without any hesitation or consultation, proceeds to perform a Catholic exorcism: “I charge thee, Satan, hous’d within this man, / To yield possession to my holy prayers, / And to thy state of darkness hie thee straight; / I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven” (4.4.52-55). After ensuing contradictory testimony from the rest of those present, Pinch again arbitrarily declares: “Mistress, both man and master is possess’d / ... / They must be bound and laid in some dark storage room” (4.4.90-92). Then, with the arrival of the officer who has come to take Antipholus of Ephesus to jail for his debts, Pinch quickly diagnoses possession a third time: “Go bind this man [the officer], for he is frantic too” (4.4.111). This sequence of events masterfully initiates a satire on the contagion of supernaturally-induced distraction that is brought to an equally cutting climax when Pinch has his prescribed treatments turned against him in the final act of the play, after Ephesian Antipholus and Dromio have:

Beaten the maids a-row, and bound the doctor,  
Whose beard they have sing’d off with brands of fire,  
And ever as it blaz’d, they threw on him  
Great pails of puddled mire to quench the hair;

...while

His man with scissors nicks him like a fool; (5.1.170-177)

These actions, perpetrated by the Ephesians--the singeing of the face, the humiliation by excrement and the nicking with scissors--brilliantly lampoons the idea that distraction has its roots in religious or supernatural grounding and that exorcism and other rituals will cure someone suffering from distraction.



The same satirical skewering performed on the religiously grounded mode of thought is practiced on the humoral explanation of madness. As the Syracusan pair of twins rush into the Priory to escape their pursuers they too, just like their Ephesian counterparts, are met with a spurious diagnosis of madness. In the same manner employed by Pinch, the Abbess pronounces madness with little to no evidence and simultaneously announces that it is her prerogative to attend to the “distraction” suffered by the Syracusians (5.1.92-111). She, like Pinch, parodies a popular method of treating distraction. While Pinch mimics the method of the exorcist, the Abbess’ actions mock the Galenic doctor. This mockery is evident when the Abbess points to “the venom clamours of a jealous woman” as the cause of distraction (5.1.68-69). As the audience is well aware, Adriana’s nagging is not the cause of even Antipholus of Ephesus’s behavior, let alone that of Antipholus of Syracuse’s, and the suggestion has much the same comic effect that it would today. The satire concludes when the Abbess claims that “Unquiet meals make ill digestion; / Thereof the raging fire of fever bred, / And what’s a fever but a fit of madness?” (5.1.74-76). According to Neely, this assessment made by the Abbess directly contradicts the common knowledge that distraction was “diagnosed by *absence* of fever.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Abbess is revealed, just as Pinch is, to be a fraud and her actions, as are Pinch’s, are purposely employed by the playwright in such a way as to evoke laughter and ridicule towards the dominant treatments of the time.

A certain level of mental unease, however, underscores this invoked laughter. G. R. Elliot refers to this unease as “weirdness”; Barbara Freedman calls it “uncanny...a truly terrifying fantasy,” and Robert O’Brien cites this anxiety as responsible for “darkening the play’s entertaining confusions.”<sup>33</sup> The source of this mental uneasiness is rooted in the obvious mental unease of Egeon, Adriana and the two Antipholi. Whereas none of these characters is possessed,

or suffering from humoral imbalance, all of them suffer from a dysfunctional relationship with the social world in which they operate. In modern terms, these characters' "distraction" results not from religious error or inward humoral imbalances, but rather from the fact that their basic "need to belong" is not being satisfied in the world of Ephesus. These characters all suffer from problems with their "social identity," defined by Henri Tajfel in his book *Human Groups and Social Categories* as "that aspect of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership in a social group." None of them possess a solid sense of "social identity," the "collective sum" of the people, places and ideas that constitute a person's identity and "good psychological health."<sup>34</sup> As a result, these characters are suffering from what the early modern period would call "distraction," and modern psychologists would call "dysphoria." This "need to belong," as Roy Baumeister and Mark R. Leary define it, is a "fundamental human motivation that is something all human beings possess...to form and maintain a least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships."<sup>35</sup> The intensity and strength of this need varies among different people, yet its basic nature and existence is something that is "difficult or impossible for culture to eradicate." The "need to belong" represents something common to all human beings regardless of their culture group.<sup>36</sup>

Another way to understand the concept of "the need to belong" is through the lens of William Schutz's Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation, which proposes three basic needs underlying people's need to belong: inclusion, which has to do specifically with the need to belong to a circle of acquaintances; affection, the need to be loved or love others; and control, which entails the need to rule or exert power over others.<sup>37</sup> The idea that distraction—specifically depression, anxiety and melancholy—can be caused when the need to belong is not met by either one or all of the basic underlying needs is discussed by many modern scholars of

psychology, including Icek Aizen, Martin Fishbein, Albert Bandura, Riia Luhtanen, Jennifer Crocker.<sup>38</sup> However, while the specific ideas of collective self-esteem and the need to belong, and their connections to distraction, are relatively modern developments within the world of psychology, clear evidence that students of human behavior such as Shakespeare observed these phenomena can be found within *The Comedy of Errors*.

Revisiting the opening scene of the play clearly illustrates how the loss of “social identity” can induce mental unrest and distraction. It is here that Egeon, in a truly distracted manner, laments his hapless condition. That condition is typified, first by the loss of his wife and eldest son, a loss that according to Egeon “me sever’d from my bliss” (1.1.118), and second by the departure of his “youngest boy,” whom he held as “my [his] eldest care” (1.1.124). Egeon’s separation from his family, his loss of inclusion within a circle of acquaintances and affection from others, has caused him to roam the world in distracted wanderings telling “sad stories” of his “own mishaps” (1.1.120). Egeon’s wandering is the product of neither religious error nor an internal bodily imbalance, but rather, a sense of loss of social identity occasioned by his separation from first his wife, and later his child.

This idea that distraction is caused by separation from one’s social identity is reinforced by Antipholus of Syracuse in his first appearance upon the stage, when he tells the merchant he “will go lose myself, /And wander up and down to view the city” (1.2.30-31). In this particular passage “Lose myself” and “wander” seem to carry the same meaning. However, Antipholus of Syracuse’s following soliloquy provides additional meaning:

I to the world am like a drop of water  
That in the ocean seeks another drop,  
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,

(Unseen, inquisitive) confounds himself.

So I, to find a mother and a brother,

In quest of them, unhappy lose myself. (1.2.39-40)

Here the connection is explicit: Antipholus of Syracuse is driven in his distracted wanderings by his desire to “find his fellow forth.” He seeks inclusion within a larger group. Yet, in his errant wanderings he, just as Egeon and The Redcrosse knight, has only succeeded in “confounding himself.” The phrase “lose myself” now seems to suggest not only a loss of social identity but also an unsettling of the psyche that is associated with the distracted individual. The arrival at a distracted state is not enacted by religious/supernatural means, nor has it come by an unbalancing of his inner bodily fluids. Instead, it is Antipholus’ loss of inclusion, in this case within his family, and his subsequent inability to identify with a larger social identity, which has signaled the onset of his distraction.

Adriana also expresses this specific type of distraction caused by the loss of one’s social identity. Needing to be solidly identified by her role within the larger marital entity that exists between herself and Antipholus of Ephesus, she remarks: “Thou art an elm, my husband, I a vine, / Whose weakness [is] married to thy stronger state,” (2.2.174-75). Adriana plainly states that it is only through her relationship with Antipholus of Ephesus that she gains her strength. When her social identity, anchored within the relationship of her marriage, is threatened by Antipholus’ liaison with the Courtesan, Adriana becomes distraught. However, even though she curses him with her tongue, her “heart prays for him” (4.2.28). This is because Adriana derives her mental and emotional well-being from her marital relationship with Antipholus of Ephesus, a fact that is further supported when she states: “For if we two be one, and thou play false, / I do digest the poison of the flesh, / Being strumpeted by the contagion” (2.2.142-44). Thus, it is

made clear that it is her separation from, or loss of, her social identity, rather than an inner imbalance or religious wandering, that conducts her to a distraught state in which distraction can settle in.

The final example of this type of distraction is evidenced by Antipholus of Ephesus, whose social identity is undividedly connected to his social status within the community of Ephesus. Unlike his wife or the Syracusian, Antipholus of Ephesus's social identity is not dependent upon inclusion or affection. He identifies himself through his well-known status and reputation within his household and community. However, as his status and reputation within both these arenas are systematically challenged and torn down, Antipholus begins a spiraling descent into dysphoric distraction. This process begins in the same scene where Antipholus of Ephesus first appears, when Adriana mistakenly bars him from his home. His initial reaction is one of disbelief: "What art thou that keep'st me out from the house I owe" (3.1.42). Yet as it is more and more apparent that his status as master of the household is being directly challenged and he will not be allowed to enter his own home he becomes frenzied, crying out: "Do you hear, you minion, you'll let us in I trow?" (3.1.54), "Thou baggage, let me in" (3.1.57), "You'll cry for this, minion, if I beat the door down" (3.1.59), "Go fetch me something, I'll break ope the gate" (3.1.173) and "...I'll break in; go borrow me a crow" (3.1.80). The connection is explicit: as Antipholus of Ephesus' mastery of his household is challenged his social identity begins to crumble, this erosion is evidenced by Dromio of Syracuse's, and ultimately Adriana's, questions of "Who is that at the door that keeps all this noise?" (3.1.61).

Antipholus of Ephesus's social identity is further attacked when he is confronted with the possibility of being publicly bound. He cries out: "thou...art confederate with a damned pack / To make a loathsome abject scorn of me; / But with these nails I'll pluck out these false eyes /

That would behold in me this shameful sport” (4.4.104). Here it is revealed that Antipholus of Ephesus’s main concern is not that Adriana does not believe him, nor is it even that she apparently no longer cares for him. Instead, his concern lies with the way in which he is being made a “loathsome abject scorn” and the fact that his shame is being witnessed. He wishes to “pluck out these false eyes” so he might not be seen “in this shameful sport.” Antipholus of Ephesus’s distraction, evidenced in the somewhat disturbing manner in which he takes out his revenge upon Pinch, is caused not by any religious or chemical imbalance, but rather a loss of social identity as he publicly loses social status, first within his household and, secondly, within the community.

Further indication that these characters' "distraction" is caused by separation from their individual social identities is found in the concluding scene of the play. It is here that each character is finally cured of their ailment. Egeon is reunited with both of his sons and his wife-- "If I dream not, thou art Emilia;" (5.1.352)--thus restoring him to inclusion within a larger group and consequently his "bliss" (1.1.118). Antipholus of Syracuse is able to rest from his "distracted wanderings" when he "finds himself" restored to his extended family and his father -- "Egeon art thou not?" (5.1.337)--thus reversing the effects of "losing himself" at the beginning of the play (1.2.30). Adriana is able to lay her distress aside when she realizes that what she perceived as her husband's irrational behavior toward her results not from any rupture in her marital relationship with Antipholus of Ephesus, but rather from an entangled knot of confusion:

**Adriana:** Which of you two did dine with me to-day?

Syr. Ant.: I, gentle mistress.

Adriana: And are you not my husband?

Eph. Ant.: No I say nay to that.

Syr. Ant.: And so do I, yet did she call me so; (5.1.369-372)

And finally, it is only when Antipholus of Ephesus' reputation, both within his household and the community, has been publicly cleared that he is able to give "much thanks for my good cheer" (5.1.392). It is only after all the confusions have been sorted out and everyone has been restored to their proper place and all afflicted characters of the play are united with their social identities, thereby fulfilling their fundamental need to belong, that the proclamation may be made: "After so long grief, such felicity" (5.1.405).

*The Comedy of Errors* intentional mockery of the dominant views on madness and its implicit suggestion of a strikingly modern view on the subject of "distraction" during the later part of the sixteenth century reveal the text as a much more than what Berners A.W. Jackson called a "two-dimensional [play] only, unsubstantial, not intended to be taken seriously."<sup>39</sup> *The Comedy of Errors*, not unlike many of Shakespeare's works, goes far beyond the simple reflection of popular contemporary views, and ultimately provides a commentary on human nature. The play is not as simple as many social historians suggest and cannot be viewed solely as a representation of early modern society.<sup>40</sup> It must be remembered that *Errors* is a fictitious account originally intended for popular enjoyment. At the same time, however, the play cannot be read, as many literary critics often do, as only a commentary on how madness functioned within Elizabethan culture. Rather, it is a delightfully constructed observation, which simultaneously entertains, by mocking "learned" attempts at curing misdiagnosed madness, and enlightens by illuminating a timeless truth about the social nature of humans and their innate need to identify with others.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For views expressing *Errors* as a ‘minor play’ see Berners A.W. Jackson who remarked that the play is “two-dimensional only, unsubstantial, not intended to be taken seriously” in his introduction to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the Pelican Shakespeare (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 116. Paul A. Jorgensen in his introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*, in the Pelican Shakespeare (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964) 55, remarks “there is left over nothing really to think about—except, if one wishes, the tremendously puzzling question of what so grips and amuses an audience during a play which has so little thought in it.” Francis Fergusson says “everything which Shakespeare meant by *The Comedy of Errors* is immediately perceptible...All we have to do is grasp the broadly absurd situation, and follow the ingenious fugue of the plot. To get the point, nothing beyond mental alertness of an easy kind is required,” in his “*The Comedy of Errors* and *Much Ado about Nothing*,” *Sewanee Review* 62 (1954), 37, 28. Larry Champion in his *The Evolution of Shakespeare’s Comedy: A Study in Dramatic Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970) summarizes the play’s plot as “no more and no less than the sheer merriment of controlled confusion” (17). See also Joel Fineman, “Fratricide and Cuckoldry: Shakespeare’s Doubles,” in *Representing Shakespeare*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 70. Harry Levin, introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*, in the Signet Classic Shakespeare (New York: NAL, 1965), xxiii. Harold Brooks, “Themes and Structure in *The Comedy of Errors*,” in *Early Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 70-71. Charles Whitworth talks at length about this “arbitrary



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assumption” in his introduction to *The Comedy of Errors* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> For recent discussions which cast the play in a more serious light see Patricia Parker, “The Bible and the Marketplace: *The Comedy of Errors*,” in *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 56–82; Barbra Freedman, *Staging the Gaze* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1991), 103-13; Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), 137-145; John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge* (Texas: Baylor UP, 2007), 18-29; Richard Strier “Against the Rule of Reason” in *Reading the Early Modern Passions*, ed Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 30-36; Kent Cartwright, “Language, Magic, the Dromios, and The Comedy of Errors” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 47.2 (2007), 331-54; Aaron Landau, “‘Past Thought of Human Reason’: Confounding Reason in *The Comedy of Errors*” *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 85.3 (2004), 189-205; Shankar Raman, “Marking Time: Memory and Market in *The Comedy of Errors*” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.2 (2005), 176-205.

<sup>3</sup> Greg, W. W. editor. Gesta Grayorum: or, the History of the High and Mighty Prince Henry, Prince of Purpoole...Who Reigned and Died A.D. 1594. Appendix II. *The Comedy of Errors* The Arden Shakespeare. By William Shakespeare. R.A.Foakes editor. (London: Arden, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The term “distract” is widely used and explained by Carol Thomas Neely in *Distracted Subjects* pages 2-5, but for our purposes we will simply cite here that the term “was a common symptom of and name for extreme cases of mental disorder” (3) and according to the

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OED the term meant: “Deranged in mind; crazy, mad, insane” (4). The term, however, also emphasizes the temporary nature of the disorder, that those distracted or “troubled-in-mind” were not permanent conditions but temporary behaviors (see Roy Porter, *Mind-Forg’d Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 22-23.

- <sup>5</sup> The term “need to belong” is used extensively by psychologists R.F. Baumeister and M.R. Leary in their work, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation” *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995), 497-529. They describe this “need” as a “fundamental human motivation that is something all human beings possess...” (497). “Collective self-esteem” is defined by Henri Tajfel in his book *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 255: as “that aspect of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.” See also J. Crocker and R. Luhtanen “Collective Self-Esteem and Ingroup Bias” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58 (1990), 60-67.

- <sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 3.

- <sup>7</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 67-123.

- <sup>8</sup> See Kent Cartwright, “Language, Magic, the Dromios, and The Comedy of Errors” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 47.2 (Spring 2007), 331-54. G.R. Elliot “Weirdness in *The Comedy of Errors*” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 60 (1939), 95-106. Aaron Landau,

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“‘Past Thought of Human Reason’: Confounding Reason in *The Comedy of Errors*”

*English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 85.3 (June 2004), 189-

205. Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespeare Bewitched” *New Historical Literary Study*:

*Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*. Eds. Cox, Jeffrey N and Reynolds,

Larry J. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 108-135. Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted*

*Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca:

Cornell UP, 2004), 137-145.

<sup>9</sup> As R.A Foakes’ introduction to *The Comedy of Errors* The Arden Shakespeare (London:

Arden, 2005) xvi-xxiv aptly demonstrates it is essentially impossible to pinpoint the exact

date of composition for *The Comedy of Errors* but Foakes’ placement of composition

between 1590-1593 seems the most likely. In any case it is not earlier than 1589 (T. S.

Baldwin) and no later than 1594 (the first recorded performance, see Appendix I).

Edmund Spenser’s *The First Booke of the Faerie Qveene* was first published in 1590,

thus placing the two compositions well within the same literary generation.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Spenser, “The First Booke of the Faerie Qveene” in *The Poetical Works of Edmund*

*Spenser* ed. Francis J. Child (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1855), 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> See Foakes, xxix-xxx for a discussion about changing the setting of the play and possible

reasons for it.

<sup>12</sup> See Foakes, XXIX and T.W. Bladwin’s *Shakespeare’s Five Act Structure* (University of

Illinois Press, 1947), 681-2.

<sup>13</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social energy in*

*renaissance England* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1988) for an in-depth discussion of Harsnett’s

pamphlet and its interaction with the social and literary worlds that surrounded it.

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- <sup>14</sup> Robert Reed, *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952), 11.
- <sup>15</sup> See Neely's *Distracted*, 142.
- <sup>16</sup> See Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 6-13.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> See Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl's *Saturn*, 254-274 and Lynn Enterline, *The Tears of Narcissus: Melancholia and Masculinity in Early Modern Writing* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 85-145.
- <sup>19</sup> Katherine E. Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1995), 195.
- <sup>20</sup> Michael Macdonald *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 48.
- <sup>21</sup> Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London: Thomas Vautrollier, 1586. Facsimile reprint, New York: Columbia UP, 1940), title page.
- <sup>22</sup> Title page, Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1632. Courtesy of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library.
- <sup>23</sup> *Distracted*, 62- 63.
- <sup>24</sup> *Old English Dictionary*, "error."
- <sup>25</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, "Commotion Strange" in *Reading the Early Modern Passions* eds. Paster, Rowe, Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press), 65.
- <sup>26</sup> *A Treatise*, 131.
- <sup>27</sup> George Rosen, *Madness in Society: Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 146.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam* 213, see also 171-231.

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<sup>29</sup> *A Treatise of Melancholie*, title page.

<sup>30</sup> Basil Clarke *Mental Disorder in Earlier Britain: Exploratory Studies* (Cardiff: U of Wales Press, 1975), 82. Paul H. Kocher *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 297-305.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan V. Crewe “God or the Good Physician: The Rational Playwright in The Comedy of Errors” *Genre* 15 (1982), 221.

<sup>32</sup> *Distracted*, 143

<sup>33</sup> “Weirdness in The Comedy of Errors.” *Univeristy of Toronto Quarterly* 9 (1939) 95-106  
 “Reading Errantly: Misrecognition and the Uncanny in The Comedy of Errors” 261-62 in  
 “The Comedy of Errors: Critical Essays” ed. Robert S. Miola Routledge 1997. Vivking  
 parg. 26

<sup>34</sup> “Collective self-esteem” is defined by Henri Tajfel in his book *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 255.”

<sup>35</sup> “The Need to Belong,” 497.

<sup>36</sup> The Need to Belong,” 499. As stated this statement would include *all* cultural groups regardless of geographic location or historical placement. Thus, it in addition to modern cultural groups it would include all historical cultural groups—early modern culture not subtending.

<sup>37</sup> See William C. Schultz *The Interpersonal Underworld* (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1966).

<sup>38</sup> Icek Ajzen *Attitudes, Personality, and Behavior* (Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press, 1988); Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behavior* ( Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980); Albert Bandura *Self-*

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*Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: Freeman, 1997); Riia Luhtanen and Jennifer Crocker “Collective Self-Esteem and Ingroup Bias” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58 (1990), 60-67. See also J.M. Barbalet *Emotions, Social Theory, and Social Structure: A Macrosociological Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) and M. Hogg and D. Abrams “Social Motivation, Self-Esteem and Social Identity” in *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances*, eds. D. Abrams and M.A. Hogg (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 28-47.

<sup>39</sup> See *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the Pelican Shakespeare (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 116.

<sup>40</sup> Neely makes this observation, see the complete introduction to *Distracted Subjects*.

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## Author's Biography

William K. Smith was born in Des Moines, Iowa but grew up largely in Idaho, spending 8 years of his childhood in Pocatello and the other 10 in Idaho Falls. He graduated in 2002 from Skyline High School. He entered Utah State University in the fall of 2002 as a History major. It was not until returning from a LDS mission in 2005 that he switched his major to English. After taking Dr. Phebe Jensen's Shakespeare class he realized he wanted to study Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture in graduate school and shortly thereafter he re-added History as a second major and also included minors in Philosophy, Spanish and Classics. While attending at USU, William worked in the writing center and as a Rhetoric Associate. He presented at the 2007 National Undergraduate Literature Conference and was the recipient of the 2008 of the Melle A. Washington Memorial Award for the Study of English Renaissance Literature.

After graduation in May of 2009, although accepted to the PhD program at George Washington University, William plans to wait a year before beginning graduate school in the Fall of 2010 so his wife may attend law school while he attends to his graduate studies in Renaissance Literature. Ultimately, he aspires to be a professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Literature and Culture.